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Shootout over the Med

A challenge to Gaddafi draws fire — and swift US. retaliation

The scene was the south central Mediterranean Sea, where naval maneuvers by elements of the U.S. Sixth Fleet were under way. The participants were the men and warships of Task Force 60, an armada comprising two aircraft carriers, the U.S.S. Nimitz and U.S.S. Forrestal, and 14 support ships. The purpose of the operation: a two-day "open-ocean missile exercise" in one of the less crowded regions of the Mediterranean. At dawn Tuesday, while the bulk of the task force stood at least 100 miles off the African coastline, two destroyers slipped into the northern reaches of the Gulf of Sidra, with the mission of patrolling the southern perimeter of the exercise and watching for stray missiles. As Washington was purposefully aware, the dispatch of the two ships was a sensitive move: the Gulf of Sidra, albeit in contravention of prevailing international agreements, is claimed by Libya, a country the U.S. considers an outlaw nation.

As the exercise began, ships and planes fired surface-to-air and air-to-air missiles at target drones overhead. F-14 Tomcats, the U.S. Navy's hottest and most versatile fighter planes, flew combat air patrol, or CAP in military parlance, watching for intruding aircraft and warning off the unwary. Since the landfall to the south was Libya, led by the unpredictable and often hostile Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, and since U.S. and French aircraft had been harassed over the Mediterranean by Libyan planes, the U.S. pilots were ready for trouble. To the north of the F-14s flew two carrier-based E-2C Hawkeye radar planes, smaller counterparts the Air Force AWACS spotting approaching aircraft and ships.

By Wednesday morning, the CAP had intercepted and waved off about 40 sorties by Libyan air force planes. Each time U.S. F-14s rolled in beside the interlopers, and the Libyan planes turned a headed for home. Had the Libyans not done so, the American pilots would have had no choice but to escort them through the exercise area, however dangerous it might be, since the craft of both nations were over international waters.

Thus there was nothing surprising or particularly ominous about the approach at 7 o'clock Wednesday morning, of another pair of Libyan aircraft from the south. The Hawkeyes detected them and radioed the CAP. Two silvery F-14s from the Nimitz swung south, spotted the Libyans on their radar, and moved in to identify them. As the two flights approached almost head on, one of the Soviet-built Su-22 planes fired an

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air-to-air Atoll missile at the F-14s. U.S. forces heard pilot say in Arabic, "I have fired." He missed. The F-14s had seen the Atoll smoke immediately and had violently broken away, evading the missile and wheeling sharply around to come in behind the Libyans. U.S. rules of engagement permit pilots to shoot back if fired upon, and each of the F-14s triggered a single heat-seeking Sidewinder missile, each scoring a hit on a Libyan plane. One of the Libyan pilots parachuted from his stricken aircraft, and was promptly rescued by a Libyan patrol boat. The engagement, 60 miles off the coast, lasted no more than one minute. It was the first U.S. military action since the ill-fated attempt of April 1980 to rescue the hostages in Iran.

News of the incident reached Washington within six minutes. As soon as he was notified by the U.S. European Command, at 1:26 a.m. E.D.T., the director for operations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Air Force Lieut. General Philip Gast, called General David Jones, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger. The Defense Secretary in turn alerted other key Administration officials, including National Security Adviser Richard Allen and White House Counsellor Edwin Meese III. Allen and Meese, who were in Los Angeles with President Ronald Reagan, received the news at 11 p.m. local time, but decided that there was no need at the moment to waken the President. The two aides monitored the news for the next 5 1/2 hours before calling Reagan, in his suite on the same floor of the Century Plaza hotel, at 4:24 a.m. Meese said later, "The President was in charge, and if there had been any action he needed to take, he would have been awakened." Reagan saw nothing wrong with the delay. Said he: "If our planes were shot down, yes, they'd wake me up right away. If the other fellows were shot down, why wake me up?"

Libya's immediate reaction to the air clash was relatively mild. The Tripoli government claimed that eight U.S. F-14s had attacked its planes and that one F-14 had been shot down, and at first did not acknowledge the loss of any Libyan aircraft. Colonel Gaddafi, in Aden to sign a political and economic cooperation agreement with the radical regimes of South Yemen and Ethiopia, called for Arab mobilization against the U.S. But his government said that it would take no action against Libya's 2,000 American residents, most of whom are oil-company employees and their families. Nor was there any indication by week's end that Libya, which ranks as the third largest supplier of oil to the U.S., after Saudi Arabia and Nigeria, planned to turn off the taps, for the very good reason that Libya has priced its oil too high and is having trouble finding buyers.

The Reagan Administration insisted that the air clash had come as a complete surprise. A senior White House official described as "preposterous" reports that the U.S. had provoked the incident, explaining, "There could not have been a provocation because the exercises were in international waters." Provocation is, of course, a loaded diplomatic term. There is no doubt that the site of the U.S. action was a challenge to Gaddafi's assertion that he controlled the Gulf of Sidra and that staging the exercise there had been intentional. When asked whether the naval exercise was meant as a lesson to Libya, one State Department official replied: "Look at a map."

President Reagan acknowledged as much the following day on a visit to the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Constellation off the California coast. "This foray by the Libyans was nothing new over the past couple years," he said. "They have frequently harassed our aircraft out beyond the [disputed] line in the Mediterranean. There have even been incidents of threats of fire. We decided it was time to recognize what are the international waters and behave accordingly." Pointing out that U.S. naval vessels periodically visit the Black Sea, while Soviet vessels sail the Caribbean, he continued, "We

didn't go there to shoot down a couple of Libyan planes. They came out and fired on ours when we were holding maneuvers in which everyone had been notified." If there was a message for the world in the incident, said the President, it might be "that we're determined to close that window of vulnerability that had existed for some time."

The U S Government's exasperation with Gaddafi had been building for a long time. Using Libya's vast oil wealth, he has fomented unrest throughout the Middle East and black Africa. In December 1979, at the time of the Iranian hostage crisis, a Libyan mob attacked and burned the U.S. embassy in Tripoli. The Carter Administration quarreled sporadically with Gaddafi; it was also embarrassed by Gaddafi's bizarre efforts to cultivate influence in the U.S. through Jimmy Carter's wayward brother Billy.

The Reagan Administration has been trying to put Gaddafi in his place by various means for some time. On May 6, the U.S. asked Libya to close its Washington embassy-or "people's bureau," as the Libyans call their embassies-within five days, charging that its diplomats had intimidated Libyan dissidents in the U.S. and played a role in the attempted assassination of a student in Colorado. The same day the State Department issued the first of a series of statements urging U.S. citizens to leave Libya and avoid visiting it-a warning ignored by U.S. oilmen. Later the U.S. announced that it would help to bolster the defenses of Libya's neighbors, Tunisia and the Sudan, to "deter further Libyan adventurism. In late July, erroneous reports were published that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency was planning to assassinate Gaddafi. This in turn caused a Libyan group called the Free Unionist Officers to threaten a campaign of "physical liquidation" against Americans, including President Reagan.

Particularly irritating to successive U.S. Administrations has been Gaddafi's interpretation of maritime law. The U.S. claims only three miles of ocean as its territorial waters, while Gaddafi insists on a twelve-mile limit. But since 1973, he has also claimed the waters of the Gulf of Sidra, which indents about a third of the Libyan coastline, as an internal sea. In some cases, a nation's sovereignty over a body of water is indeed recognized by international agreement, provided that the mouth of the bay or gulf concerned is no wider than 24 miles; the mouth of the Gulf of Sidra is more than ten times as broad as that. No other nation, not even the Soviet Union, recognizes the Libyan claim.

Since 1973, U.S. naval vessels have operated inside the gulf four times, most recently in July 1979. Last week's venture into the disputed area-the first during the current Administration-was carefully planned. The naval exercise was cleared in July by the National Security Council. Shortly thereafter, the commander of Task Force 60, Rear Admiral James Service, was called to Washington to discuss the operation with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The reason: the exercise was regarded as a subject of "great complexity," said a Pentagon spokesman, and one that was "not without risk." While in Washington, Service reviewed the rules of engagement covering the circumstances under which an airman may open fire on hostile forces. The Administration decided that 1) the U.S. would show Gaddafi that it did not accept his claim to a slice of the Mediterranean and 2) if the Libyans attacked, the U.S. would reply in kind.

Exactly why a Libyan pilot did attack last week remained a matter of conjecture. After all, two score Libyan planes had entered the area and left peacefully before the clash, and at least eight more appeared later. The pilot who fired the Atoll missile must surely have known that he was facing superior American aircraft; in any case, at least two Libyan MiG-

23s, much more advanced aircraft than the Su-22s, were in the area of the dogfight and did not intervene. Did Tripoli order the attack or did the pilot panic? Did he make a mistake of bravado or simply trigger the Atoll by accident? Or did he perhaps believe that, as had happened at least once before, in 1973, the American planes would not return fire?

Throughout Europe, the reaction to the incident was fairly restrained. The British government seemed sympathetic to the U.S. action, though some London papers felt that Washington had overstepped. In France, which has had its own troubles with Gaddafi, public opinion seemed to favor Reagan. The left-leaning Le Monde thought the new Administration had adopted "a doctrine of rising immediately to the challenges that are addressed to it." In Moscow, which regards Gaddafi as one of its few friends in the Arab world, a TV commentator declared that Washington's "piratical action" had caused "a storm of indignation around the world."

In the Middle East, Gaddafi was supported by the Palestine Liberation Organization, Syria, Algeria and South Yemen. P.L.O. Chairman Yasser Arafat, whose commandos have received sizable amounts of arms and ammunition from Libya this year, called the air clash "the beginning of a new phase in the conspiracy against Libya and the Arab nation." Israelis, on the other hand, were relieved. "This will make our lives much easier," said a high-ranking officer in Jerusalem. As for Gaddafi's old enemy Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian President nothing, perhaps to avoid the appearance of gloating. After weeks of rumors the American maneuvers were an effort to test Gaddafi, many Arabs were simply nonplused. As the Beirut daily an-Nahar noted, Washington might just as well have issued invitations to the air battle. By whatever name-provocation or challenge-it had perhaps not come as all much of a surprise. -By William E. Smith. Reported by Bruce W. Nelan/Washington and William Stewart/Beirut

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